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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BUCHAREST 000409

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STATE FOR EUR/NCE - WSILKWORTH AND CA/OCS/ACS-SSCHMIEDER
NSC FOR DAMON WILSON
PASS TO DEPT OF AGRICULTURE

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TAGS: [KFLU](#) [TBIO](#) [FAID](#) [CASC](#) [WHO](#) [RO](#)

SUBJECT: ROMANIA HOLDS REGIONAL MINISTERIAL ON AVIAN FLU

REF: A. A) BUCHAREST 00310

- [¶](#)B. B) 05 BUCHAREST 2177
- [¶](#)C. C) 05 BUCHAREST 2152
- [¶](#)D. D) 05 BUCHAREST 2185
- [¶](#)E. E) 05 BUCHAREST 2205
- [¶](#)F. F) 05 BUCHAREST 2239
- [¶](#)G. G) 05 BUCHAREST 2302

Classified By: DCM Mark Taplin for Reasons 1.5 (B) and (D).

SUMMARY

[¶](#)1. (C) Romanian Minister of Agriculture Flutur invited his counterparts from Bulgaria, Moldova, Turkey and Ukraine to discuss Avian Flu in Bucharest on March 6. The group's first event was a tour with U.S. Ambassador Taubman of the Ministry's Laboratory that has just installed the USG-funded real-time PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) machine for testing H5N1. A standing room only press event followed in which Minister Flutur thanked the U.S. for the donation of equipment and accompanying training, and emphasized the need for regional collaboration and transparency in fighting Avian Influenza (AI). The Ambassador likewise called for transparency and global cooperation to fight the spread of AI. A two-hour meeting followed at which the five ministries were supposed to have shared their experiences to date. However, the visiting agriculture officials showed little sign, to put it mildly, of wanting to confront the challenge of AI on a coordinated regional basis. End Summary.

Romania Taking Lead on Avian Flu

[¶](#)2. (U) Since early October, when Romania first discovered AI in the Danube Delta, the Ministry of Agriculture has been the front line of defense in Romania's campaign against AI. Agriculture Minister Flutur leads the Government of Romania's (GOR) inter-agency working group, which meets on a daily basis. In light of Romania's success so far in confronting AI, Ukraine and Bulgaria have sought the benefit of the GOR's experiences. We have likewise been encouraging Romania to demonstrate regional leadership and offer advice to its neighbors. At Flutur's invitation, Bulgaria, Moldova, Turkey and Ukraine sent their ministers or vice-ministers of agriculture to Bucharest on March 6. The purpose of the visit was to share experiences and the status of AI in each country. Attendees included Bulgarian Minister of Agriculture Nihat Kabil, Moldovan Deputy Minister of Agriculture Anatolie Spivacenco, Ukrainian Deputy Minister of

Agriculture Victor Pabat, and Turkish Secretary of State in charge of the Food Safety Authority Ramazan Kadak.

Press Event Highlights US Assistance

¶3. (U) The first official event was to visit the Bucharest National Animal Health Institute Laboratory where a new US-funded real time PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) machine had been installed. Touring the lab in white protective clothing, the Ambassador and other high-ranking visitors received a tour of the facility and an explanation of how the new PCR increases the speed and accuracy of tests for H5N1. Press interest was so high that there was standing room only in the conference room where the Minister and Ambassador both made brief remarks emphasizing transparency and regional cooperation. Unfortunately, the first question from journalists was an attack on Bulgaria's AI response, accusing the country of a lack of transparency that could jeopardize the health of Romanians. The Ambassador replied that the fact that all of the neighboring countries were here to work together was a good indication that all present were serious about fighting AI.

Regional Reps Still in Denial

¶4. (C) Yet behind closed doors in the inter-ministerial meeting, representatives from nearby countries did not seem attuned to the long-term nature of the AI threat. For instance, the Bulgarian Minister of Agriculture claimed that the disease had come from Romania, and that if Romania did its job properly, then Bulgaria would not have a problem. He asserted that his country had no reports of AI at present, so "there is no problem in Bulgaria." Moldova said it is worried about AI only in that the two neighbors, Romania and

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Ukraine, were struggling with AI outbreaks. The Moldovan Deputy Minister assured the group that Moldova would continue to monitor closely, and learn from the neighbors' experience.

Most remarkably, the Turkish head of Food Safety Authority stated that, although Turkey had had to deal with a "few isolated outbreaks" of AI, the Turkish government had eliminated the disease and everything was back to normal in Turkey. The Turkish representative made no mention whatsoever to the Avian Flu related deaths in January.

(Note: The Turkish Ambassador to Romania recently echoed this same attitude and message to the Ambassador, claiming that Turkey had eliminated AI. End note.) Ukraine reported that it had taken firm actions, especially in the Crimea, to stamp out AI and that the situation was under control.

¶5. (SBU) Flutur told the group that he had also originally thought that AI was going to be something that prompt, firm actions would eliminate and that life would go on as normal. However, he explained that he was now convinced that AI was the "new reality" and that we must adopt better barnyard practices in poor rural households and higher bio-safety standards for the poultry industry.

¶6. (C) A group from the European Commission delegation in Bucharest, including its head, arrived late at the meeting and offered a few remarks. Flutur thanked it for attending, and then pointedly thanked the US again for the donation highlighted earlier in the morning. He said he appreciated the international support over the past six months as Romania has fought the spread of the disease. He stated that the technical experts were very helpful, but emphasized that the additional new equipment was helping his ministry immensely in the battle. The suggestion was not lost on the audience that at this juncture, equipment and training was more highly valued than advice.

Comment

¶7. (C) Romania's Minister of Agriculture made a sincere attempt to organize a regional discussion. However, it was

obvious that the party line from the neighboring countries is "everything is under control" and "the problem is behind us."

This attitude of denial and lack of transparency, some of our contacts here worry, contributes to a false public impression that Romania is failing in its battle against AI while its neighbors are successfully stamping it out.

Flutur expressed to Emboffs last week his concern over public criticism that Romania is doing poorly compared to neighbors.

He acknowledged that transparency was essential but that the neighbors were not making it easy for him to do the right thing. Instead, the visiting agriculture officials put emphasis on their worries for their local poultry industries and their hope that the public would not panic and stop buying poultry. Bulgaria and Moldovan officials cast the problem as largely Romania's. Less clear was their willingness to encourage more vigilant surveillance and transparency, promote more public awareness, and to generally grapple with the serious challenges of AI in an honest and responsible way. End Comment.

TAUBMAN